

ON RUNNING FEUDS

Ep. 49: How the DVD Killed the UMD

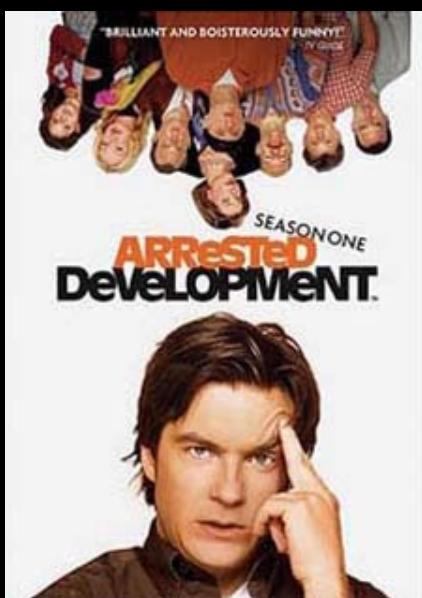
Archive: On Running Feuds

Before we get down to the meat and potatoes of this story, I would first like to take a few moments to talk about the passing of the UMD. Although Sony's mini-DVD format, the Universal Media Disc or UMD for short, is new and there are still companies supporting it, there's no way around the inevitable conclusion that this media is dead on arrival. So hold up your glasses and make a toast as we attempt to get to the bottom of just what went wrong, and why Sony's newest movie format never had a chance.

As most of you know, the UMD is the format of choice for Sony's first portable, the PSP. It's a small disc enclosed in a plastic guard, not unlike the Mini-Disc Sony pioneered a few years back. For the most part the UMD is straight forward, holding just under 2 GB of data that can be used just like a normal DVD. As you can imagine, this amount of space allows for larger games with better graphics and sound, something Sony hopes will lure people who would not normally buy a handheld game system. Unfortunately, that's not all Sony wants to do; some skeptical minds might suggest that they were doing nothing more than selling you a media player for their very own movie format.



If this is your first time seeing Sony's PlayStation Portable, perhaps it's time to get your nose out of Nintendo Power!



At twenty minutes an episode, Arrested Development makes a lot more sense to

watch on your new PSP. Not that you will ever see it on UMD!

almost the same as their DVD counterparts, it will be hard for anybody to warrant buying the UMD version over a DVD that offers extra features, better video, and Dolby Digital and DTS surround sound support. And since DVDs are so popular, if you don't want to pay the full asking price, chances are you can get it used for cheap if you just wait a few weeks.

You see, while the UMD appears to be good for gaming, Sony has high hopes for its success as a DVD format. Early adopters of the PSP will have a chance to try out a UMD movie without paying any extra, since Sony's own Spider-Man 2 is being shipped with the first million units. But even outside of Spidey's web PSP owners can pick up any number of Hollywood blockbuster hits, including XXX, Resident Evil: Apocalypse, and Once Upon a Time in Mexico, all released at or around the launch of the system.

With such a *hot* line-up of hits coming, what more could you ask for? Oddly enough, the people behind these UMD movies have taken that approach to heart, generally offering little to no extras on the disc. Sure it sounds good and the video is fine, but these are bare bones versions of movies people probably have on DVD already. To make matters worse, these UMD's are selling anywhere from \$19.99 all the way up to \$29.99 ... offering no extras and no real surround sound support.

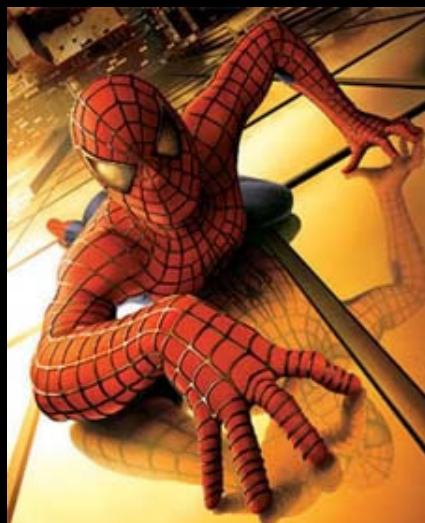
The price itself is a major reason the format has been pronounced dead on arrival. Considering the prices are

Sadly the studio's hands are tied. When it comes to pricing, DVDs are already extremely cheap, if they go much lower the bean counters fear they will not get the proper return on investment, ultimately leading to what could only be considered a bad business decision. Since the invent of DVDs companies have done all they can to give consumers as much value for their buck, it's one of the few products where the amount of content keeps going up as the prices of the discs themselves are going down. These days you can buy a two-discs version of Hellboy for less than it costs you to buy the newest CD by Eminem. This simple fact has made it a hostile place for something like the UMD.

There's also the concern of a format that is not compatible with your home theater system.

Anybody who has had to wait at a bus station or airport knows that there's nothing better than having a movie to watch to pass the time, and the PSP is a great little unit for such an occasion. But not every movie should be seen on a small portable screen, and more times than not you'll find yourself wanting to lie on the couch and view the movie rather than load it in your PSP. Movies are meant to be seen on a big screen; they are larger than life and give us a world to escape to. Sure there are times when it's fun to watch a movie on the go, but how many people are going to choose the handheld screen over their home TV?

And there's that large group of movie lovers who don't buy movies at all, but rather rent Hollywood's finest. Will Blockbuster Video be there for these people? And if so, will the prices be cheaper to rent per movie? Obviously these are rhetorical questions, as we all know that the video rental chains of the world will not rent UMD movies. Heck, you'll be lucky if they rent the PSP games. Even if the PSP manages to sell ten million units, that will still be mere dirt compared to the DVD sales, giving few companies real reason to focus their attention on this dead format.



Obviously you can use your Memory Stick to store movies, but since converting the material is illegal Sony doesn't want to hear anything about doing that with Spider-Man 2!



You know something is wrong when you can buy the newest J. Lo DVD for less than the new J. Lo CD ... Not that you'd want to!

So why make these UMD movies at all? If all of this is true, then why would Sony want to take business away from the current DVD market and whatever future Blu-Ray has? Unfortunately it's the conspiracy theory that likely holds the most water. The PSP is a movie player, both with UMD's and by converting DVDs to the special media type the portable takes. The problem is, converting a movie and putting it on your memory card is illegal in all 50 states. It might have been Sony's intention to have people convert movies, but as long as it's against the law Sony cannot come out and use that as a selling point.

This theory might seem too simple, but when you look at the facts everything adds up. We all know that Sony has no problem with you converting movies to the PSP format, after all, they released a converter in Japan that did exactly that. We also know that Sony has intended this device to be a movie player, they've talked about this feature as much as the games themselves (maybe

more). But since you can't do this without breaking the law, it only makes sense for Sony to suggest you buy the UMD movies, while knowing exactly what you're going to do and not having a problem with it. Underhanded? Sure ... but it gets the job done, and perhaps even gives meaning to this new format. Heck, maybe it isn't so bad after all; maybe it's a little disc with a purpose. That's the kind of thing I can get behind.

Or maybe this is way off; maybe Sony really does expect us to pay \$20 instead of converting the file to your memory stick. Perhaps Sony just likes making new formats, hoping that eventually one will stick. But when you can buy the same movie for the same price on DVD with all kinds of bonus features, it's hardly a deal. In fact, there's a word for something like that: DOWNGRADE!

By Cyril Lachel
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